

Executive Summary of Business for Education and Student Regulations Sub-Committee

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| Title | Annual Report: Postgraduate External Examiner Reports 2024-25 |
| Status | Report |
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| Summary of paper | <p>This paper provides a summary of comments raised by PGT External Examiners (including UG and PGT External Examiners for partner institutions) on the 2024-25 assessment cycle for on-campus and collaborative partner provision and a response to issues raised by external examiners requiring an institutional response.</p> <p>Sections A - E of the report present a thematic summary of issues raised by external examiners following a review of the 2024-25 reports. This element of the report comments on a range of issues including those relating to standards, marking, comparability and process. The report also identifies a series of aspects of good practice observed by examiners which they have reported back to the University.</p> <p>No major risks were identified in the compilation of this report, although significant concern has been raised regarding the application of the update borderline regulation. Chairs of Progression and Award Boards are responsible for responding to individual external examiner reports which form part of the evidence base for the Annual Course Review and the Periodic Review process.</p> |

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| <p>Strategic context</p> | <p>The University is required as part of OfS registration to continue to meet the suite of conditions that relate to quality and standards. In the context of this report, this includes:</p> <p>B1 The provider must ensure that students registered on each higher education course receive a high-quality academic experience.</p> <p>B3 The provider must deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers and/or enable further study.</p> <p>B5 The provider must ensure that, in respect of any relevant awards granted to students who complete a higher education course provided by, or on behalf of, the provider (whether or not the provider is the awarding body):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - any standards set appropriately reflect any applicable sector-recognised standards; and - awards are only granted to students whose knowledge and skills appropriately reflect any applicable sector-recognised standards. <p>Ongoing compliance with the B conditions are a requirement of continued registration with the OfS. Breaches of or increased risk of a breach of these conditions can result in investigation leading to removal of eligibility to participate in the TEF, removal of an existing TEF award, regulation of degree awarding powers, access to the allocation of some types of OfS public grant funding.</p> <p>This report forms part of a suite of reports designed to provide evidence that can be interrogated by UEC and Senate so that assurance can be given to Council that the OfS conditions continue to be met.</p> |
| <p>Recommendation</p> | <p>ESRSC is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider the analysis of University-level issues for 2024-25 and proposed responses • note that School-level issues will be considered at Faculty Education Committees and will form part of Annual Course Review |

Section 1: Summary and analysis of postgraduate external examiner reports 2024/25

1. Introduction

1.2 The University is required as part of OfS registration to continue to meet the suite of conditions that relate to quality and standards. In the context of this report, this includes:

- B1 The provider must ensure that students registered on each higher education course receive a high-quality academic experience.
- B3 The provider must deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers and/or enable further study.
- B5 The provider must ensure that, in respect of any relevant awards granted to students who complete a higher education course provided by, or on behalf of, the provider (whether or not the provider is the awarding body):
 - any standards set appropriately reflect any applicable sector-recognised standards; and
 - awards are only granted to students whose knowledge and skills appropriately reflect any applicable sector-recognised standards.

1.3 This report provides evidence from the external examiner reports and is part of a suite of reports designed to provide evidence that can be interrogated by UEC and Senate so that assurance can be given to Council that the OfS conditions continue to be met.

1.4 UEC maintains oversight of the University's external examiner system on behalf of Senate.

2. Purpose of External Examiner

2.1 External examiners are one of the principle means by which the University upholds academic standards. External examiners support the University in ensuring that the University's award requirements are appropriate and that the academic standards achieved by students are comparable to the sector. The University regularly reviews its policies and processes for external examining and ensures alignment with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

3. Appointment and Induction

3.1 An External Examiner is appointed to each course of study, including awards delivered by partner institutions which lead to an award of the University of Sussex, for a period of 4 years. A rigorous appointment process is in place to ensure that examiners are appropriately

experienced and that they can provide independent scrutiny and carry out their role with impartiality. External examiners are usually academics employed by other universities. External examiners are appointed to:

- a) Advise the University on whether the academic standards of its awards are consistent with the standards defined by the University, the standards of similar awards elsewhere and the standards maintained by professional bodies and accrediting agencies
- b) Provide an external evaluation of the extent to which processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are consistently and fairly applied

3.2 New External Examiners are primarily inducted through the material sent out by the Academic Quality and Partnerships (AQP) office and the Faculty. All new and existing External Examiners are invited to an induction session that familiarises them with the role of the external examiner at Sussex and the Progression and Award Regulations. This usually includes an opportunity to meet with School faculty and students.

3.3 A standing item on the agenda for each meeting of UEC is an update on External Examiner nominations and approvals.

4. The External Examiner Role

4.1 Specific aspects of the External Examiner role include:

- signing off heavily weighted assessment tasks, for example exam papers or essay questions
- reviewing samples of completed assessments across the classification bands to establish that the outcomes are consistent and fair with reference to the marking criteria and assessment task
- attending the Progression and Award Board to ensure that the assessment procedures are applied consistently
- completing an annual report to help the University confirm that academic standards have been maintained

5. Annual Reports

5.1 AQP is responsible for the receipt, initial consideration and distribution of all external examiners' reports to Schools.

5.2 As of 29/01/2026, 84% of the reports that were expected have been received by AQP for the 2024/25 session (134/160 reports received). This compares to a 72% response rate in 2023/24. The Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education and Students) has the option to consider terminating the contract if a report is not received in time to be considered as part of Annual Course Review.

5.3 Action plans in response to Faculty-level issues will be considered by Faculty Education Committees and responses sent directly by the Chair of the Progression and Award Board

(PAB) to External Examiners. The reports and the action plans will be reviewed during the Annual Course Review process.

6. Institutional issues emerging from External Examiner Reports 2024/25

6.1 The following issues have been raised by External Examiners. Proposed responses and actions are included in italics. Institutional-level issues for 2024-25 reflect those for 2023-24.

Academic Standards

External examiners consistently confirm that academic standards are appropriate and aligned with national frameworks for postgraduate provision. However, significant concern is expressed regarding the application of award classification and borderline regulations, particularly at postgraduate level. Multiple examiners identify cases where rigid application of institutional rules appears to produce outcomes that conflict with academic judgement, sector norms, or principles of fairness.

Assessment Design and Learning Outcomes

Assessment strategies are generally regarded as well designed, intellectually challenging, and capable of differentiating student performance. However, there is concern about over-reliance on traditional assessment formats, particularly essays, exams, and presentations. There is strong support for greater diversity of assessment formats.

Marking Criteria and Use of Rubrics

While the criteria are generally viewed as appropriate, examiners highlighted an opportunity to improve the consistency, clarity, and application of marking criteria and rubrics and suggested the development of online marking rubrics that will improve the clarity and cohesive.

Feedback Quality and Consistency

Feedback is often praised for its depth and supportive tone. Examiners also noted opportunities to improve consistency in format, length, and developmental value across programmes. Key areas include offering clearer guidance for high-achieving students, using a more consistent structure, focusing on evaluative rather than descriptive comments, and making more consistent use of tools such as quick marks and exemplars.

Moderation, Marking, and Transparency

Examiners generally express confidence in the robustness of marking and moderation processes, but several note opportunities to improve transparency and evidencing. Moderation timelines are also frequently described as very tight, creating pressure for both staff and external examiners.

Examiners are also highlighted a concern of invisible misconduct to individual markers. Examiners emphasise the value of clearer guidance, more consistent reporting practices, and institution-wide approaches to managing AI-related risks.

7. Analysis of Reports

7.1 Sections A-E provide a summary of data extracted from the external examiner reports 2024/25 and areas of good practice amongst University of Sussex Faculties and Partners Institutions.

8. Conclusion

8.1 No major risks were identified in the compilation of this report and in the majority of cases External Examiners report positively on the provision that they examine. Acting as critical friends, examiners identify areas for enhancement or improvement, and these are carefully considered by course teams, with a formal response being sent by the Chair of the PAB to each examiner. A number of issues are identified for consideration at the institutional level.

8.2 ESRSC is asked to consider whether these reports provide sufficient evidence for it to recommend to Senate that the University continues to meet OfS conditions B1, B3 and B5.

8.3 ESRSC is asked to endorse the report for consideration by Senate.

